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THE NORMAL SCHOOL BULLETIN

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EASTERN ILLINOIS STATE NORMAL SCHOOL
CHARLESTON

New Poetry and the Composition Class

By
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English, Eastern Illinois State Normal School

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To Miss Amy Lowell for "Sunshine" and "Reflections", used by permission of, and by special arrangement with, The Macmillan Company, publishers.

To Mr. Robert Frost for "A Patch of Old Snow" from "Mountain Interval", \$1.25 net, Copyright 1916, by Henry Holt and Company.

NEW POETRY AND THE COMPOSITION CLASS

To the composition teacher anxious either to free himself from the shopworn "Manual for Composition" models for narration and description, or to supplement these classics with material which shall arouse a class and appeal to them through its inherently stimulating interest, the New Poetry is a fascinating, constantly increasing field. Subject matter drawn from the everyday world within reach of the average child's intellectual experience, and pictured with a maximum of vividness and a minimum of exact words, invariably arouses enthusiasm. Instead of the conventional reams of "Downtown on Saturday Afternoon", "A Sunday School Picnic", "A Sunrise", "A Sunset", "A Storm", and their multitudinous ilk, the child learns to look with eyes of interest upon the ordinary objects and events around him. He sees a theme in two leafless trees standing by themselves on a hilltop; in brother and sister, or next door neighbor; in what has before appeared an uninteresting, stale mediocrity of front or back yard at home; yes, even in the drudgery of daily dishwashing, or in a matter-of-fact dismantling and reconstructing of a discarded Ingersoll watch so that it goes. New Poetry, used judiciously, is both an excellent eye-opener to the beauties of the world of the near at hand and a teacher of the art of brevity.

Among the smaller contemporary poet group—the self-christened Imagists—notably in the work of Amy Lowell, John Gould Fletcher, and with less frequency in that of F. S. Flint, Richard Aldington, and the tenuous, elusive carver of intaglios, H. D., one may find rare stimulant to creative composition. Only, and the

warning cannot be too emphatic, the teacher must choose carefully, select with utmost freedom the one or two picture verses in a long poem and discard the remainder, ever ready to suppress a now and then erotic line which, beautiful per se, will seem silly and artificial to the child, and will be provocative of mental reactions endangering the success of the work. Beauty in demand of expurgation may be found in Miss Lowell's "Reflections".

REFLECTIONS

When I looked into your eyes,
I saw a garden
With peonies, and tinkling pagodas,
And round-arched bridges
Over still lakes.
A woman sat beside the water
In a rain-blue, silken garment.
She reached through the water
To pluck the crimson peonies
Beneath the surface,
But as she grasped the stems,
They jarred and broke into white-green ripples.
And as she drew out her hand,
The water-drops dripping from it
Stained her rain-blue dress like tears.

As written, these lines are entirely unsuited for use in a classroom; omit the line, "When I looked into your eyes", and the result—a glowing garden picture, gloriously imaginative, exquisitely wrought—invariably delights the beauty-thirsty soul of the child and suggests a "Why can't I do that too?"

I shall quote here the Imagist's "Statement of Belief", omitting the second article of faith which voices the right to create new rhythms, and so, obviously, has no place in a composition programme. With reservations, this Credo might well serve as the ideal for the class in narration and description. The italics are mine.

1. To use the language of common speech, but *to employ always the exact word, not the nearly exact, nor the merely decorative word.*

3. *To allow absolute freedom in the choice of subject.* It is not good art to write badly about aeroplanes and automobiles, nor is it necessarily bad art to write well about the past. We believe passionately in the artistic value of modern life, but we wish to point out that there is nothing so uninspiring nor so old-fashioned as an aeroplane of the year 1911.

4. To present an image (hence the name "Imagist"). We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we op-

pose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.

5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.

6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.

A few of the more delightful exhibits from the Imagist gallery follow:

SUNSHINE

The pool is edged with the blade-like leaves of irises.
If I throw a stone into the placid water,
It suddenly stiffens
Into rings and rings
Of sharp gold wire.

—Amy Lowell

OREAD

Whirl up, sea—
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir.
—H. D.

FROM "THE GARDEN"

Fruit can not drop
Through this thick air;
Fruit cannot fall into heat
That presses up and blunts
The points of pears
And rounds the grapes.
—H. D.

(These lines are almost unequalled for the exactness with which they suggest the heat of a summer day through an imaginative exaggeration of the effects of the temperature upon the growing things in the garden; a particularly good model if the teacher is working for "Description through Suggestion".)

FROM "DAWN"

Above the east horizon,
The great red flower of the dawn
Opens slowly, petal by petal;
The trees emerge from darkness
With ghostly silver leaves,
Dew-powdered.

—John Gould Fletcher

FROM "ARMIES"

Under the soft grey windswept sky,
 Between two rows of yellow trees
 Suddenly dripping;
 The brown backs of an army
 Go marching.

—John Gould Fletcher

THE SKATERS

Black swallows swooping or gliding
 In a flurry of entangled loops and curves;
 The skaters skim over the frozen river.
 And the grinding click of their skates as they impinge
 upon the surface,
 Is like the brushing together of thin wing-tips of silver.

—John Gould Fletcher

FROM "IRRADIATIONS"

Flickering of incessant rain
 On flashing pavements;
 Sudden scurry of umbrellas:
 Bending, recurved blossoms of the storm.

The winds come clanging and clattering
 From long white highroads whipping in ribbons up summits;
 They strew upon the city gusty wafts of apple-blossom,
 And the rustling of innumerable translucent leaves.

Uneven tinkling, the lazy rain
 Dripping from the eaves.

—John Gould Fletcher

(A passage noteworthy for the umbrella metaphor, the sound words applied to the wind, and the concluding vignette of rain dripping from the eaves.)

How shall this New Poetry be used in teaching boys and girls to write?

My own experience with it in the classroom, not extending below the eighth grade, has been almost entirely with children whose poetry experience has been meager, whose range of interest has seldom extended beyond the farm or the small town. Our work has grown naturally out of the composition problems, frequently beginning as a sequel to an assignment in which members of the class have been asked to discover and submit to their fellows examples, found anywhere in reading which the young discoverer has enjoyed and believes would be of help to the class in learning to write. Following an hour spent with these discoveries, one might say, "Now to-morrow I shall try to bring you some things which I like". Curiosity as to what a teacher will bring should maintain and stimulate interest until to-morrow. And with to-morrow's arrival, there should be no suggestion that the selections

are at all unusual or different from regular prose models. Even to hint that one is going to read poetry defeats the purpose entirely; it immediately puts the models far away from the child and raises the involuntary barrier of, "Well, I couldn't do that, anyhow. That's poetry."

A simple introduction to the work may call attention to some of the most prosaic things to be seen from the classroom window. Is it early spring, when the unmelted, grimy snow remnants are still lying about in ugly patches? Why does no one choose that snow, just as it is, for a theme subject? Such a question is almost sure to stir the class to protest at the absurdity of the proposition. "Whoever heard of writing about muddy old snow?" "Nothing interesting about that." "I wouldn't want to read anything about a mess of slushy snow."

Then from the teacher: "You're sure then, that it couldn't be interesting? But I once knew of a man who won a prize for writing about snow no better looking than what you see from the window. Should you like to hear it?"

Here should follow Robert Frost's

A PATCH OF OLD SNOW

There's a patch of old snow in a corner
That I should have guessed
Was a blow-away paper the rain
Had brought to rest.

It is speckled with grime as if
Small print overspread it,
The news of a day I've forgotten—
If I ever read it.

The reading finished, one may quietly ask, "What do you think of it?" A class which has been encouraged frankly to express their own ideas, will respond with comment usually varying from enthusiasm to scorn. Frequently the majority attitude will be that of uncertainty, wavering between like and dislike at the strange newness of it all. It's different, and yet no one can define exactly what the difference is. Informal discussion should be permitted thoroughly to air the individual opinions, stimulating the indolent of intellect to an awareness of what is going on, when the teacher may ask, "But whether you liked it or not, did you see the picture?"

With this particular poem, there should be an almost unanimous agreement that the picture was very clear. The remainder of the period can profitably be used in discovery—the process should be that of discovery, with all discovery's attendant thrills—of the qualities that make the picture good. Slight guidance from a teacher, and the blackboard should show, as the lesson result at

the close of the hour, an outline somewhat similar to the following :

1. This is an everyday subject which a reader can understand more clearly because he knows something about it himself.
2. The subject is very narrow—a single patch of dirty snow.
3. The writer must have looked at that snow until he had a very clear picture in his own mind.
4. The writer told exactly what he saw in as few and as simple words as possible.
5. The writer compared the snow to something everyone knows about.
6. The writer made his description very short, so that the reader could see it all at once without forgetting the beginning before he reached the end.
7. A good many words are pictures in themselves.

There should be at least a surplus five minutes before dismissal for suggesting that it ought not to be hard for the class to find subjects such as this to write about, and, by doing the same things that Mr. Frost did, to produce a picture that their readers, the other members of the class, can see. The group should be allowed to suggest subjects at which they should like to try their hands, and should be dismissed with the assignment, "Let me see what you can do in making a picture like this for to-morrow".

Now and then, before setting immediately the task of writing, one would do well to ask that a list, as long as possible, of "common things around me that I see everyday, know a great deal about, and in which my readers would be interested", be brought to class. This assures that the group has caught the idea of beauty and interest in the commonplace, and successful compositions are more likely immediately to result.

After a class had attempted, with the resulting prosaic catalogues of "I saws", to picture a school garden, I have made profitable use of Amy Lowell's "Sunshine" (quoted above), afterwards asking for new attacks upon the garden. With almost every child there has been an improvement in ability to select from the clutter a few significant details, which, properly grouped, do paint for the reader a picture of the essential garden.

Thus far, this discussion has been concerned largely with the pupil, permitting itself a digressive warning of the need judiciously to choose the usable excellent from the ever increasing mass of frankly bad and level mediocre of the New Verse. For

the teacher who is to use it approximating the ideal result of an interested and enthusiastic class, writing enthusiastically, entertainingly, and sincerely, what are the indispensable desiderata of equipment? Beyond the usual demands of personality, education, and technical skill in class management, there are perhaps two qualities which a teacher should take with him when he carries New Poetry to the composition class. First, and without which nothing, there must be a genuine, living interest and glowing enthusiasm for New Poetry, for the aims, experiments, successes, and failures of the poets. One must feel the democracy, the vitality, the newness, the joy of it all, before he can arouse others. It must be no halfway, baptism-by-sprinkling enthusiasm, but deep and complete immersion in the glorious, contagious joy-of-living-here-and-now of these newest voices of the twentieth century. One must love the New Poetry; love it unreservedly because it represents freedom, the attempt to discover beauty in the all around, the desire for a more complete self-expression, for the attainment of which a poet gladly accepts rules that aid in making his Self a vividly intelligible Self to the reader, while even more gladly he rejects those rules which are but trammels, denying vehemently the dicta of those who, in the past, unable to create, have taken to themselves the task of regulating and classifying the creators,—dicta which announce: "Here is Beauty; all else is Ugly, and about it you must not speak".

Second in importance only to enthusiasm, is the need for knowledge, as wide and intimate as possible, of new poets and the New Verse. Such a knowledge is easily acquired, for America to-day, as almost never before, is interested in poetry and is producing much of a high degree of excellence. Even neglecting the annual output of volumes of verse, the anthologies of this and that, one has only to turn a watchful eye to the newspapers and popular magazines to discover much good verse, many delicious personality comments on the makers of verse, and innumerable estimates, enthusiastic, judicial, and condemnatory, of those who write and that which is written. Read, Clip, and File; this should be the procedure. Even a modest wielding of scissors and paste supplies in a surprisingly short while, first, a good collection of classroom models, and secondly, a wealth of generators of enthusiasm, provocators of further reading, for the teacher's personal delectation.*

Given enthusiasm and knowledge, what results can a teacher who introduces the English class to New Poetry (again let me say,

*For those who may be interested, there is appended to this bulletin a list, which by its very brevity attempts suggestion only, of recent publications which the writer has found valuable in his work with contemporary verse.

in reason and not in a wild orgy, or with the virulence of measles) expect?

First, and axiomatically, more interesting compositions, because

Secondly, the pupil will have become interested in the New Verse, all the time ignorant that it is poetry, and will imitate. To the possible doubting retort, "Will he?", I can answer unreservedly, "Yes, if the material is well presented". The "Yes" is strengthened by remembrance of one thirteen-year-old boy straight from the clutches of an ungraded, uneducative rural school, a youngster of whom I question whether up to that moment he knew there was such a thing as poetry existent. Composition seemed a hopeless task; long descriptive models in our manual quite evaded him. And then, purely by chance, one morning I read to the class the opening lines of John Gould Fletcher's "Dawn", and with but a moment or two for comment passed on to a now forgotten something else. To-morrow came and piled high my desk with themes; correction discovered this amazing opening sentence in an otherwise ordinary story of a morning hunt for something or other, participated in by my hopeless boy and "some other fellows"; "In the east the great red flower of the dawn was slowly opening".

I could have shouted. He had at last caught something. Extreme and out of keeping with the rest of the theme though it was, I could not refrain from commenting favorably on that sentence at the next meeting of the class. Far, far easier to trim a too luxuriant growth than to start the growth in a desert place. And I was grateful to the New Poetry for starting the growth.

More and better than mechanical imitation, is the tendency on the part of the pupils, in their own simple way, to do the sort of thing the new poets are doing. My personal and very definite opinion of the why of this tendency is that the poet of to-day, writing exactly of what he sees, giving free rein to the imagination and feelings, is often expressing the natural thought of the child, is writing as the child would write did we not take it upon ourselves to trim and train and mould the young thoughts and ideas into the thoughts and ideas of the conventional adult world. With the moulding begun shortly after the age of five and continued indefinitely, what chance does the child have? Because it says the things he would naturally say, a great deal of New Verse interests the child, and again he discovers courage to express in his own way those beautiful thoughts which we, his teachers, have forced into the remoter halls of consciousness, have permitted him to enjoy only in the splendid moments when he is alone. A child is

naturally a poet; New Poetry is a potent aid in revealing the poetry of his nature.

The following sentences are culled here and there from the work of an eighth grade which has learned to like the New Verse.

I.

A SCENE FROM THE SOUTH DOOR

A cold north wind swept the bleak landscape, drifting the freshly fallen snow in wavy heaps. Tall, cold, bare poplar trees swayed and moaned near the abandoned Lily Pond. In the thickly forested background, pines and shrubbery stand almost buried in downy waves of snow.

II.

The bleak and brown trees shivered in the cold and bowed before the wind. The lily pond was covered with snow and seemed especially cold on account of the thought that I would hate to be a goldfish.

III.

(From the weakest imagination in the group)

Behind the willow stood out the dark trees against the leaden sky.

IV.

Green shows through the icy cover of the evergreens.

V.

Suddenly in the distance the clear ringing of a bell sounded, echoed, and re-echoed.

VI.

The black-blue sky dotted with cold sparkling stars was miles and miles away.

VII.

Not a sound was to be heard but the crunching of the snow under his [a sentinel's] feet, which sounded like the crack of a gun in the chill night air.

VIII.

His teeth chattered until he wondered if they would not drop out.

IX.

Coming home the wind was to my back, but by puffing very hard it seemed to go through my coat.

X.

As far as I could see the ground was nothing but a barren desert of snow, with the bare black trees swaying in the gale.

(This specimen, exactly as it was written except that for the sake of the effect I have grouped the sentences in such a way as to give more nearly the appearance of verse, was written early in the term by one of the less promising members of the class.)

COLDNESS

Everything was still with cold.
People hurried along with a quick, stiff movement
as the snow screeched under their feet.

I see a dignified figure covered with fur come through
the snow,
While just as I turn the corner a beggar stands, dressed
in rags and shivering in the still cold air.
His shaggy mustache is covered with ice, and his feet
are numb with cold.

The only sounds are the ringing laughter of children
on the ice and the screeching of the snow.

Night is drawing near.

Everything is still with cold.

Crude though they be, these selections show promise; they are the sincere, enthusiastic product of a class that had been unconsciously introduced to the New Poetry.

A BRIEF LIST OF BOOKS OF AND ABOUT NEW POETRY

- I. COLLECTIONS OF VERSE (Some poems in the first four which are suited for class use are indicated.)

THE NEW POETRY—AN ANTHOLOGY Edited by Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson The Macmillan Company

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The Sea Bird to the Wave	49
Oread	66
The Garden (Second stanza of II)	67
Moonrise (First three lines)	67
Portrait of an Old Woman (First two stanzas)	93
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SOME IMAGIST POETS

The Houghton Mifflin Company

Childhood	(Last stanza on page 5)
Round Pond (Omit last two lines)	12

The Travelling Bear	83
The Bombardment	89

SOME IMAGIST POETS, 1916 Houghton Mifflin Company

Clouds Across the Canyon	40
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SOME IMAGIST POETS, 1917 Houghton Mifflin Company

Blackberry Harvest	44
Moonlight (First stanza)	47
Dawn (Lines 1-6)	49
Armies (First two stanzas)	51
Zeppelins (Lines 1-5)	57
Sunshine	80
The Pond	82

North of Boston Robert Frost Henry Holt and Company

Mountain Interval Robert Frost Henry Holt and Company

Men, Women and Ghosts Amy Lowell The Macmillan Company

The "Anthologies of Magazine Verse", issued annually under the editorship of Mr. William Stanley Braithwaite, and "The Golden Treasury of Magazine Verse", a collection of what Mr. Braithwaite considers best in the several anthologies, are excellent collections of contemporary verse.

"Poetry, A Magazine of Verse", should be on the reading list of every teacher interested in "The Movement".

II. Books about the New Poets and Their Work

Tendencies in Modern American Poetry Amy Lowell
The Macmillan Company

(Authoritative appreciations of six leading American poets of to-day, with liberal selections from their work)

The New Era in American Poetry Louis Untermeyer
Henry Holt and Company

The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century William
Lyon Phelps Dodd Mead and Company



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